Are you investing in your future or wasting your time and money on CEUs? CEUs are an investment in your future and, like all significant purchases, should be taken seriously.

At eighteen, I was ready to make an investment in my future by buying a reliable, affordable, and economical car, so I headed to the used car lot. Among the numerous options in color, age, make, mileage, and models, I found a car that fit my budget, appeared road worthy and, according to the Dealer’s Data Sheet, got high gas mileage. I was in heaven.

Within two weeks I was stranded on the roadside twice and had to pay for major repairs. It also became apparent that the only way the car was going to achieve the advertised mileage was if it was freefalling or being towed, so I returned to the dealer to complain. The salesperson pointed out the fine print on the bottom of the Data Sheet which read: Your mileage may vary. He followed up with, “You get what you pay for.” My money was spent, and I did not get what I needed. I was in misery.

Adages like “Your Mileage May Vary” (YMMV) and “You Get What You Pay For” (YGWYPF) are subcategories of Caveat Emptor (Latin for “Let the buyer beware”) that are more than just witty sayings and apply to more than just purchasing used cars.

A college education was my next big purchase, and the phrases YMMV and YGWYPF were in the forefront as I thoroughly researched various universities. I considered location, convenience, cost, professor credentials, and the college’s emphasis (teaching, research, etc.). Because college would be the foundation of my career, I was determined to get the biggest return on my investment and make the best choice.

After securing my degree, I came to realize that college was not, and could not be, the end of my education. I realized that I had not only a chance but a responsibility to continue my education by earning Continuing Education Units (CEUs or PDHs), which give me an opportunity to not only refine and improve my engineering skills but to achieve greater success. Self-Development Guru Brian Tracy pointed out that, “Those people who develop the ability to continuously acquire new and better forms of knowledge that they can apply to their work and to their lives will be the movers and shakers in our society for the indefinite future.” CEUs provided the opportunity to acquire new and better forms of knowledge.

Beyond the personal gains an engineer may receive through continuing education, CEUs are important to the profession and the safety of the public. They offer opportunities to learn about new procedures, materials, and techniques. CEUs help engineers stay up-to-date with current code requirements. Ultimately, CEUs are an investment in your future and, therefore, should be taken seriously. Although some states accept almost any CEUs to retain a professional engineering license, it is important to maximize the return on your investment of time and money by participating in CEU programs that will build on your college education and fill gaps where additional training is needed to open doors to new opportunities. As Benjamin Franklin said: “An investment in knowledge pays the best interest.”

YMMV and YGWYPF apply to our investment in CEUs. CEUs require an investment of your time and your money – both of which are non-refundable – so it is important not to get caught in the YMMV and YGWYPF trap. The easiest way to avoid the trap is to have a plan.

I recently spoke to a group of engineers and suggested a 4-step process for securing the most from CEU opportunities:

1) Determine where it hurts. What problems are you currently facing? What challenges are preventing you from achieving your highest potential? Determine your weak points and address them by obtaining CEUs in relevant technical or non-technical courses, such as business development, marketing, networking, human resources, writing, accounting, or team management. Be open to new learning opportunities.

2) Consider before you buy. Not all CEU programs are created equal. Some are true educational opportunities filled with valuable content while others merely give you something to do for an hour. Look for providers with a proven record of offering quality programs.

3) Be prepared, be present. Request the instructor’s slides/notes before the presentation, so you will know what the course will cover and you can prepare questions. You paid to participate in the event. You know where it hurts. Now ask your questions and get answers. Be actively engaged in the educational experience.

4) Have a retention plan. The information you acquired is of little value if you do not remember it. Research indicates that you will only remember 50% of a 10-minute presentation immediately after you hear it. By the next day, you will lose 75% of the information. Within a week you will only remember 10% of what you learned. The best way to receive long-term benefit from a presentation is to review the related written material early and often.

If you feel like you are not receiving the mileage you should out of your career, or that your career has stalled and left you stranded on the side of the road while your competition and colleagues pass you by, I recommend reevaluating your continuing education vehicle. Engage in programs that will provide a return on your investment. Carefully consider available CEU options and strengthen your long-term success by investing in educational opportunities that will benefit your career and protect the public. What are your thoughts? Would you like to share your ideas? The discussion continues at www.STRUCTUREmag.org.

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